

Traces of Beauty

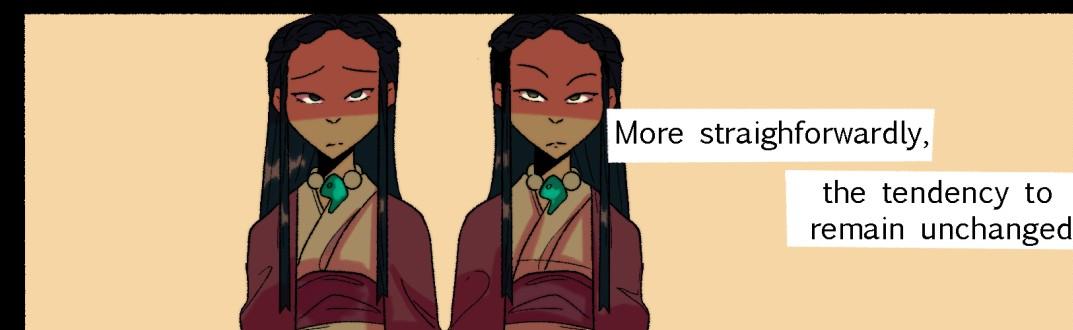
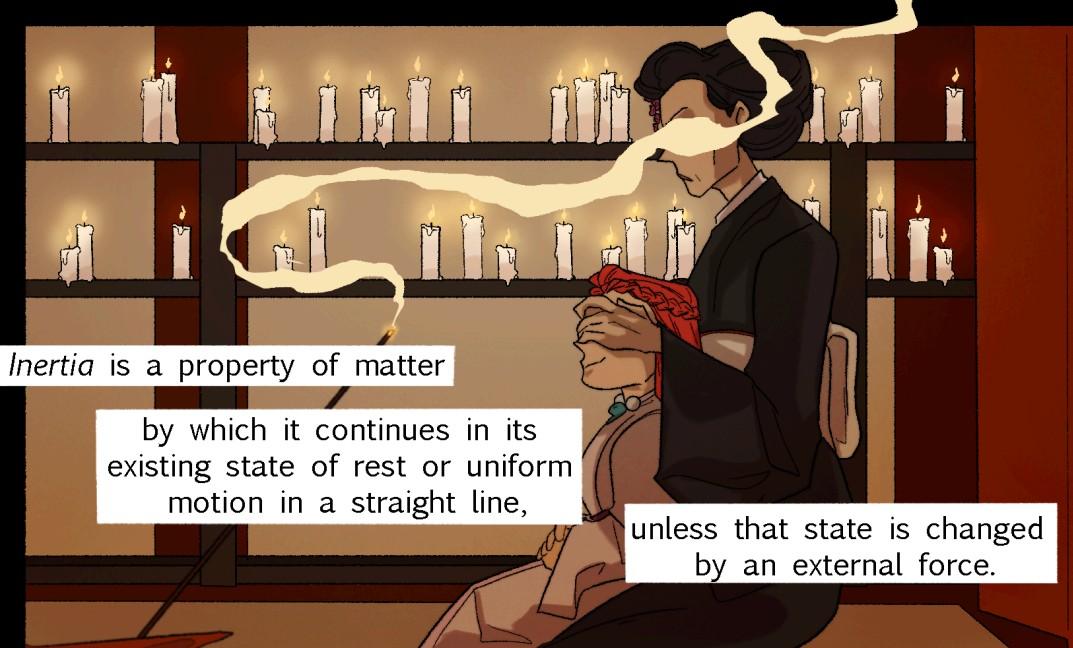
a Dahlia Hawthorne Zine

Introduction

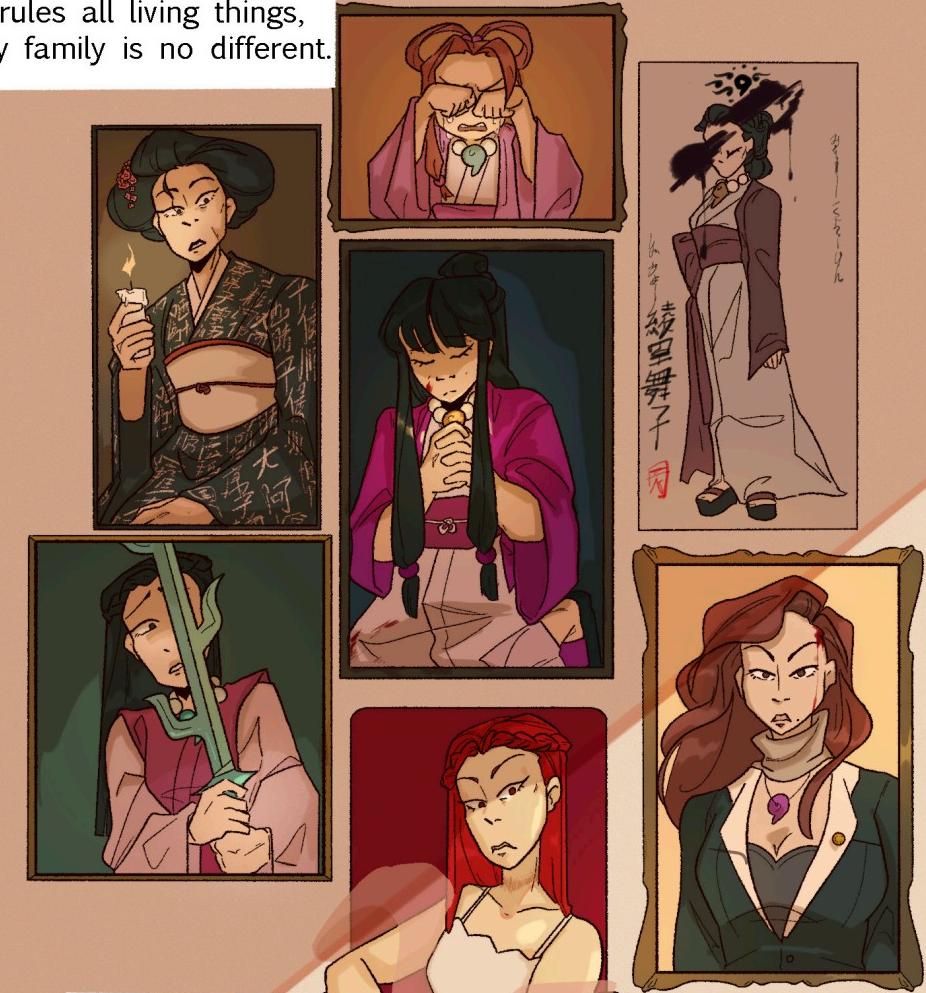
Thank you so much for purchasing Traces of Beauty! When I first pitched this idea to my mod team, they were hesitant that this zine would get any attention at all. Dahlia Hawthorne is not an especially popular character, and is in fact widely disliked by a lot of people. Nevertheless, we put out an interest check, and were stunned by the response we got. This zine is a labor of love, not only for the mod team but also for the contributors. Every person in here worked hard to create something amazing, and they did it for love of a character who is so often maligned. This project was full of passion and love, and I hope that shines through in the works before you.

-Sydney (Head Mod)

Traces
of Beauty



This rules all living things,
and my family is no different.



If the laws of the universe
demand consistency,



THE WEBS WE WEAVE

by: Téa

When Dahlia was old enough to sit up by herself, a bundle of raw cotton was placed in her hands. She and Iris took turns pulling it apart as their mother worked at the wheel, spinning thread day after day after day. Thread that was made into fabric. Fabric that was cut in squares, sewn together with yet more thread, and made up the robes they wore daily.

When Dahlia was old enough to have the necessary fine motor skills, she was handed a drop spindle. A pile of cotton in her left hand, she spun for hours next to Iris.

When the Feys were not training, they were spinning.

Dahlia loathed it. It was boring, difficult, and it took forever to make anything worth anyone's time. Sometimes, Iris' thread would get thick and clumpy, but she was faster than Dahlia. The older members of the village praised Iris when she managed to spin a few inches of thread spider thin. And Dahlia hated them. She hated how they sat around and spun and made fabric and made clothes and made dye and made their own bread. She hated how much work it all was, how they always seemed to talk about the same things, the way nothing was ever fun.

All they wanted from her was her power and for her to spin their thread. Make their clothes. Sit under a waterfall. Grow their food. Offer up her body to a corpse. Spin more thread.

But before Dahlia could master the art of a drop spindle, not that she wanted to, they were

leaving Kurain and their mother and all that spinning.

Dahlia had no belongings, a father she didn't like, and a twin who couldn't handle her own. Dahlia didn't know what the outside world was like, but she had seen enough from the magazines her cousin snuck in to guess Iris wouldn't be able to handle it. Iris could spin. Dahlia could not.

Iris went to Hazakura. Dahlia went to the city.

She replaced a twin with a step-sister and hand-made robes for brand-name clothes. The father, she could do without.

But she swore she would never spin again.

Whatever Dahlia thought the world outside Kurain would be, she was wrong. The world is larger, busier, more *everything* than she ever could have imagined. Her childhood was bland and dull and empty, but this... This is *living*.

Or, at least it is when Dahlia gets time to herself.

There's a different type of control at work here, one that she teaches herself to navigate to keep her head above water. Ways to placate Valerie, her father, her teachers at school, other students. The right smile, the right turn of phrase, the right time to cry, the right time to laugh.

Elementary school is a breeze, and middle school is hardly a bigger challenge. Dahlia is smart in all the ways that matter: academic, emotionally, and socially.

It only takes a little bit of work for her to make others fall into her social web—get them to do her favors and slide things her way. Tilt the scales in her direction. Pass her shuttle through the threads of her work.

And all it takes is a smile.

Even when it comes to Terry Fawles.

Dahlia had just wanted a way out, but things spiraled out of her control. Her father pressing in on one side, Fawles on the other. She was tied up tight, bound to a situation she wanted nothing to do with. It was strangling her. And she needed to get out before something happened and she couldn't pull herself from the fallout.

So she bats her eyelashes and forces herself to keep playing a part even as she felt sick to her stomach. And she strings together a plan. An idea based on a passing comment from her father during dinner, a bit of bragging that he thinks will go by with a little praise and nothing else.

But Dahlia isn't one to let an opportunity fly by her. She snatches it from the air and holds it close until it's time to use to her advantage.

She gets Valerie to agree to the plan, leveraging freedom. Distance from their father. All that *money*.

She gets Fawles on her side. His overly enthusiastic agreement makes her nauseous. But she smiles and giggles and makes a call to her sister.

The one everyone else had forgotten.

Going back to Hazakura is like stepping into a photograph, even though Dahlia was only there for a couple of minutes when Iris was dropped

off. It feels too much like Kurain; a barely-there memory so faded that Dahlia only gets flickers of it at a time. Flickers and memories that she has tried to suppress. To burn.

She is not a Fey and she will never *be* a Fey. She refuses to be trapped by their ancient rules and traditions, forced to let someone else's spirit take over their bodies for money.

Dahlia is her own person.

And she's sick of her father.

She may not have seen Iris in years—exchanging only a couple of letters a year, if that—but Dahlia *knows* Iris can help.

All the loose threads of the plan are slowly coming together, and soon Dahlia will have the full picture. The tapestry of a future that she's been dreaming about. She'll be rid of her father. She'll be rid of Fawles. She'll have the diamond. She'll have her *freedom*.

"I *need* to get out of there, Iris," Dahlia begs. "You don't understand."

And Iris can't. She never will. She has no idea what it's like outside of her tiny little temple—outside of meditation and sashes and magatamas that flicker with faint power.

Dahlia clenches her fists. She will never need power from another person or object. She wields her own weapons, as delicately or wildly as she wishes.

Iris looks up. She's been working on a blanket with a complex pattern. Trying to figure out how she does it makes Dahlia's head spin. She *loathes* the way this room smells. The smell of cotton and wool and dye.

"What about after?" Iris asks softly.

Dahlia shrugs a shoulder. "Valerie will take care of me."

"Valerie?"

She arches an eyebrow. "Yes, our stepsister?" Dahlia almost forgets the 'our.' Iris is so separate from everything that Dahlia currently considers her life. They barely exist in the same universe. But if Iris can do this for her...

"You could stay here," Iris says in a rush. She squeezes the shuttle in her hand, knuckles turning white. "With me. No one would even think to look for you here and—"

"No."

Iris looks down at the bundle of fiber in her hand. "Right," she mumbles, her gentle voice shattering the bitter cold of the air.

Dahlia closes her eyes and forces herself to take a deep breath. Iris doesn't understand. Iris hasn't *tasted* a sliver of freedom. She doesn't know how intoxicating it is.

And if Dahlia doesn't do this right, she'll be giving up everything.

"I can't be *here*," she gestures around the room. Simple. Bland. No heating. "I don't *want* this. I want to choose my own life."

"And this is how you go about it?" Iris asks, her voice trembling. Fragile as a flower. Thin as a spiderweb.

Dahlia needs someone with incentive and fangs and a *spine*. And this is why she left her sister at this temple. Free of their so-called family.

"It's the best way," Dahlia says. Somehow, despite not seeing Iris' face in so long, she thinks Iris has the gall to doubt her. "You don't understand what's at work here; you just *spin*."

Iris lowers her eyes to the spinning wheel placed next to her loom. "And is that so bad? Maybe I enjoy it."

Dahlia laughs bitterly. "That's because it's all you've ever known! You've never had a cappuccino! You've never seen a movie in a theater. How

can you be happy when your life when it's just so..."

Iris gives Dahlia an empty look. "Boring? Traditional? Humble?" She pauses before adding, "Primitive?" with a bite.

Yes, Dahlia thinks. How can Iris give her entire life over to some preplanned destiny? How can she not care?

She picks up a drop spindle from a low table. "Aren't you sick of this?" she asks. "Don't you just want to leave? To go *anywhere* else?"

Iris stares at her. Still wearing the same robes she had when they were children. Still spinning the same thread. "I—I don't know. I hadn't really—"

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life *spinning*?" Dahlia throws down the drop spindle, not caring if it breaks. She's almost annoyed when it doesn't, the stupidly sturdy thing. She kicks it away from her. "I wouldn't!"

Iris watches the spindle hit a wall and bounce off it. She closes her eyes and takes a shaky breath. "... I want to be wherever you are, Dahl. That's what matters, isn't it?"

She doesn't say the word, but Dahlia can hear it. *Family*.

What does their family have to do with anything? Their mother was useless and let them be taken without a care; their father was neglectful and greedy at best. A step-sister only good for an escape route. Cousins more powerful and dangerous than they would ever be—somehow *superior* for ancient magic that rips control from their hands.

Family means nothing. Dahlia can only count on herself. She has to.

Dahlia sits down with a huff. "What matters is having a *life* outside all of this. *That's* what matters." She tugs at Iris' robes. "Anything would be better."

Iris' eyes are watery, and Dahlia knows she's winning her over.

"You could come with us," Dahlia says, twisting another possible lie into place. "Afterward. You, me, and Valerie. We could do this. *Together*. Be together." She doubts it will happen, Iris is too static for that kind of change, but she takes her sister's hands in her own anyway and squeezes them tight. "The two of us versus the world."

Iris gives Dahlia a wobbly smile. "Together." "Together."

Iris backs out.

Dahlia should've known. There was a reason that she convinced her father that Hazakura would be a better place for Iris to grow up. And maybe it was, but maybe it just made her even softer.

But the plan can happen without Iris.

And it does.

The ropes around Dahlia's neck loosen.

It's almost three years before Dahlia speaks to Iris again. Iris sends letters and Dahlia casts them aside.

(Often after reading them. Some of them are desperate for information. Others are about daily life as if nothing had changed. Dahlia wonders if Valerie gave Iris their address.)

Valerie goes on and on about how Dahlia should forgive her sister. How Iris backing out hadn't been a cowardly betrayal. How Iris was protecting herself from the crime they had committed.

Dahlia attempts to taste the freedom she had craved. That she fought for. That she wants to

devour.

Valerie pulls her back; a marionette with its strings twisted and entangled.

And then Fawles calls.

Dahlia knows she should feel bad about Valerie. For stabbing her step-sister and shoving her cooling corpse in the trunk of a car.

But she doesn't. She should feel *something*, but she doesn't.

Like a spider wrapping up the bugs caught in its web, it was just what needed to be done for survival.

The police spoke to her after she had gotten Fawles implicated once again, and only then her hands started to shake and her mind began to rattle. Only then did she feel the warm, nonexistent blood, slick between her fingers.

Valerie was going to come clean. And Dahlia can hear her voice in her head: "*She was protecting herself.*"

So was Dahlia.

Her and Iris were twins after all.

Though Dahlia felt nothing after killing Valerie until hours later, she feels nothing when Fawles dies on the stand.

She has nothing but disgust to feel toward Fawles.

He deserved this fate.

He deserved to rot in prison.

He wouldn't have gone this way if he hadn't broken out.

This is all for the best, anyway.

And it's not as if Dahlia had held the knife this time. She had simply given him the necklace.

It's not her fault he chose to drink it.

That should've been all. It should've been over.

But then, Diego Armando and Mia Fey. Dahlia sneers at Mia as she watches them dig into Melissa Foster.

She has been systematically snipping each tie to her family, but they keep coming. She is trying to be a successful college student, but no, the star jewel of her childhood has to be rubbing her nose into places where it doesn't belong.

She schedules the meeting. She feels nothing as she slips poison into Diego's mug. Nothing as he slumps over. Nothing as she flees the scene.

But then.

Phoenix Wright.

Hazakura is a brief sanctuary. And Dahlia remembers when Iris begged her to stay. But that was the past, and this is now. Now, Dahlia needs Iris. Because Dahlia can only count on herself, except right now, she needs help.

And she has leverage.

"You weren't there for me at Dusky Bridge, but I need you to be here for me *now*," Dahlia begs.

Iris heaves a shuddering breath. "I don't—"

Dahlia grabs Iris' arms, pulling her deeper into the shadows of the temple. "Iris, please— please, I don't want to go to jail, I—I panicked, and I made a mistake, but—" She laces her voice with as much fear as she can. Fear and panic that, despite how much she's trying to shove it away, she actually *feels*. Like a rock sinking slowly in her stomach, dragging her down, down, down to drown in the depths of her own conscience and consequence.

Iris gently tries to pull away. There's a slight terror in her eyes. Because her sister is a murderer. Her sister is a killer.

Her sister is her sister. And wasn't Iris all about family?

"Dahlia," Iris shakes her head. "I'm not sure that this is a good idea—"

"They'll find me." Dahlia grabs Iris' hands and squeezes them tight. "I know it. I just need to get rid of the evidence, that's all. I just need you to be me for a few days. Only as long as it takes to get the necklace back." She chokes back a sob. It's mostly faked. "I'm terrified of going to prison. They'll—they'll kill me."

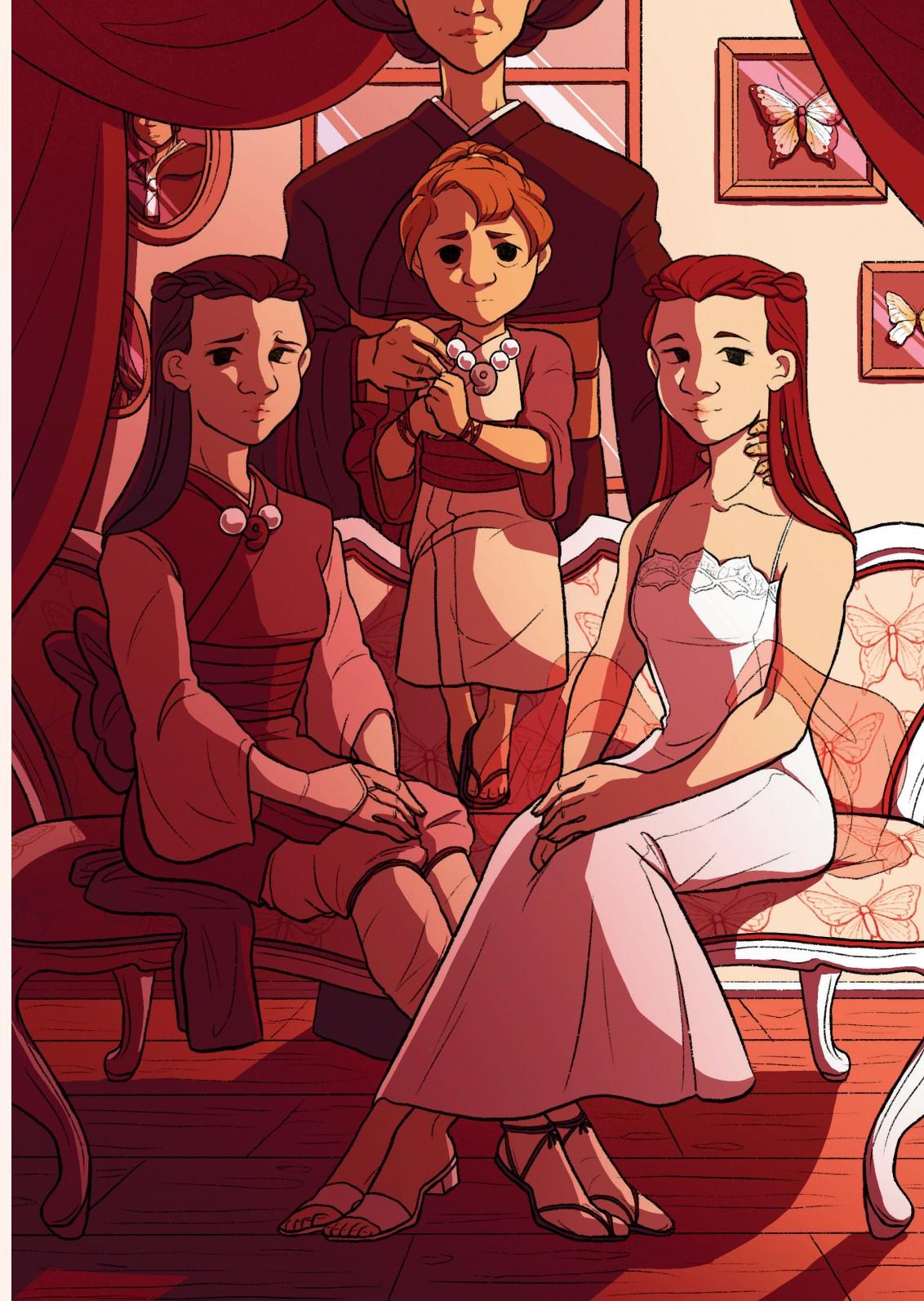
Because they would. Until she gets the necklace back, her life has a fast-approaching expiration date, and she has no idea what it is. And she would die in the Eagle River before she was executed for murder.

She wouldn't die though. Dahlia would live.

A million emotions flash through Iris' eyes. Dahlia tries to read her expression, tries to figure out she's thinking. Would she really abandon her twin sister in her time of need?

Dahlia whispers hoarsely, "I'm going to die."

She lets her voice crack. Iris' eyes soften. They buy red hair dye. And the web goes taut.





FEMME FATALE FOR HIRE

by: Mab

"So," April asks as she leans in close to the bathroom mirror to fix her lipstick, "who is the chump this time?"

Dahlia pulls out her phone and taps the screen to bring up the photo. "Him."

April glances down at it from the corner of her eye, then gives an inelegant snort of amusement. "Oh, now that's a look, isn't it? Goatee and scruff?" She pulls a face, eyes squeezed shut and tongue stuck out between her pink lips like she had just tasted something incredibly unpleasant. "Blegh!"

"He's one beret short of being a beat poet wannabe," Dahlia agrees, and slips the phone back into the strap of her dress. "Loves coffee, though, so I hope that's not a turn-off."

"Blegh! Oh! Blegh!!" April does a little dance in place. "Where do you even find these guys?"

She clicks her tongue and runs her fingers through her hair. The smile that she had painted in place while at the table with the man melted as soon as she had entered the bathroom — and she's already dreading having to put it back on when she leaves. There's only so long the sugar-sweet act can last before even she gets tired of it. But their targets fall for it every time.

"Honestly?" Dahlia asks, and April meets her gaze in the mirror with a look that says she would *absolutely* love a little honesty. "It's for my late cousin."

Dahlia never mourned Mia's loss, never cared for that side of the family enough to even show up to the funeral. But if there's one thing that really strikes a chord in her, it's when men think they're entitled to far more emotional pain than they deserve.

Diego Armando is just such a man.

April hesitates, fluttering her eyelashes as she thinks. "Oh. The one that passed away, right?"

The moment of honesty over, Dahlia sneers and rolls her eyes. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not."

"Good."

"Fine." A beat, then April grins and fluffs at her hair. "That's enough for me."

Dahlia fingers the charm on her necklace before allowing a small smile to cross her lips as well. "Are you ready?"

April undoes one too many buttons on her blouse and winks. "I was, like, *born* ready," she says, all coy and not like her usual self at all. "See you out there."

Dahlia leaves the restroom first, because she's already spent too long in there and any more might make even a self-centered man like Diego suspicious. Her expression changes as the door to the bathroom swings shut behind her. She twirls one finger through her hair as she returns to the table she was sharing with the man — not quite able to call it a date due to the

way he still chases after Mia's memory, but it's not *not* a date.

And it's not like he knows they're cousins.

She drops down into her chair with a sigh, toying with the charm on her necklace as she does so. "Okay! What was it that we were talking about again? You were telling me about one of the trials you were in!" Dahlia leans in and cups her chin in the palms of her hands as she looks up at him. "You know, a friend of mine at school is interested in becoming a lawyer." Don't let Phoenix hear her call him a 'friend', though, he might read too much into it.

Diego looks up from his phone, his lips pressed into a slight frown. "School? You're a student?"

Oh brother, did he really not pay attention at all? "Yes, at Ivy U. I graduate next spring." She smiles and tilts her cheek into the palm of one hand, waiting to see what he'll say next. A gentleman would ask her what she's studying, but she's not holding her breath on this one.

"If that friend of yours is interested in law," he says, and if Dahlia was any less of a professional, she would get up and walk away, "he should sit in on some of the trials at the courthouse."

Just *what* did Mia even see in this man? And while, as far as Dahlia was aware, the two of them were never an item, she knows that Mia at least tolerated him. Somehow. Even this is pushing the limits of her patience.

It's the end result that she holds onto — that sweet moment of victory that makes this all worth it.

Sometimes she'll just teach them a lesson, a little show of humility to burst their ego. But as she sits across the too-small cafe table from Diego Armando and smiles blithely at whatever he says, she knows that there's no way she can let him off lightly.

For a brief moment, Dahlia considers switching pronouns on this 'friend', changing it from

Phoenix to someone else, some imaginary friend more worth her while, but that might ruin the image she is attempting to cultivate for this conversation. So she lets it slide.

"What a wonderful idea," she says instead. "I'll be sure to let him know."

From the corner of her eye, she can see April leaving the bathroom with a bounce in her step. Dahlia fiddles with her necklace, feeling the catch of the lid give way beneath her fingers. With a deft turn of her wrist, she flips the bottle upside down before sealing it shut once more. "Oh! You're all out of coffee. Let me get you a new one."

"I can get it myself—" Diego starts, reaching forward, but Dahlia is quicker.

She places her hand over the cup to keep him from lifting it. A dainty gesture in execution, but a distraction as the tip of her finger brushes over the opening of the lid. "Please," she says, "my treat."

He stares at her, hand hovering over hers. There's a scrutiny in his gaze that she imagines must be his little lawyer brain trying to put something together.

But then his expression clears, because of course it does. Her performance has been flawless. Diego gives her a crooked grin that he must think is incredibly charming but makes her want to just dump the entire bottle from around her neck into his cup and damn the consequences. "Of course, sweetheart. Thanks."

She returns the smile with one of her own and rises to her feet. There's a short line at the register, so she simply skips the entire thing by heading directly for the drink counter.

Dahlia takes the lid from the cup before passing it back to the flustered barista. "Just another coffee, please." She flutters her eyelashes for good measure, but the kid has been looking at her since she walked in. He would have done it even if she tossed the cup in his face.

While she waits, she fiddles with the clasp of her necklace.

April is at the register ordering, drawing out the entire process by shifting her weight from one hip to the other, twirling her hair around her finger, and asking the cashier all sorts of questions. If she takes much longer with that act, then the timing will be ruined.

The other woman catches her gaze and gives a playful wink, before finally completing her order and tipping generously.

"Here you go, Miss," the barista says, sliding the cup back across the counter to her.

"Thank you so much." Dahlia fits the lid back into place, relieved to find that the kid didn't at least try to put his number on the cup.

She turns and takes a step just as April rounds the counter, and the two of them run into each other with a startled squeak. Dahlia had been sure to maneuver the cup between them just in time so that the pressure of their collision causes the lid to pop off and some of the coffee slips down her hand and onto April's exposed chest.

April gives another yelp of surprise, this one genuine, and there is a flash of annoyance in her eyes before it passes back into character. Her hands fly up, half to shove Dahlia away, half to wipe uselessly at the coffee staining her blouse.

Dahlia feels April's fingers catch onto the necklace, and the clasp gives without much resistance. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" she says, watching as the necklace disappears into April's pocket.

Everyone else, she knows, will be too busy watching the other hand at the level of her chest.

"Oh my god!" April whines and stomps her foot. "You like, totally ruined my new blouse!"

"I didn't mean to." Dahlia hates simpering, but the role demands it. She lifts a hand to her

mouth, shrinking in on herself despite the coffee still dripping down her hand. She thinks a little bit got on the hem of her dress as well. "I really am very sorry."

April's nostrils flare, and while Dahlia is well aware of the other woman's fiery temper, she's rarely on the receiving end of it. Even for jobs like this one. She opens her mouth to retort, but then Diego is inserting himself into the conversation.

Trying to be some kind of knight or something.

"Now now," he says, stepping in to completely block Dahlia from April. "I'm sure we can settle this without having to make a scene..."

The change in April is immediate. The anger is gone and a bashful smile takes its place. "Oooh, I'm, um, so sorry!" She winks and reaches out to swirl one finger over his chest in a teasing pattern. "But since you asked so nicely, I guess I can forgive her."

"Glad to hear it." Diego turns to Dahlia, and she blinks away the tears as she lifts a hand to her mouth in distress. "Are you okay?"

From over his shoulder, April winks again, then turns to talk to the barista. Her part done, she'll get her drink (probably for free) and she'll head out. She'll hold onto the necklace until Dahlia deems it safe to take it back.

For now, however, she keeps her attention focused on the target. "I—I'm okay. Thank you." She takes the napkin that he offers her with a mixture of relief and surprise that he doesn't produce the silk kerchief he undoubtedly has somewhere on his person. A man who dresses like that is bound to have a matching silk kerchief. "I'm sorry, I spilled a little of your coffee. I'll get you another—"

"Nonsense. I'm not one to waste a single drop." Irritatingly, he grabs her wrist before she can turn away and plucks the coffee cup from her fingers.

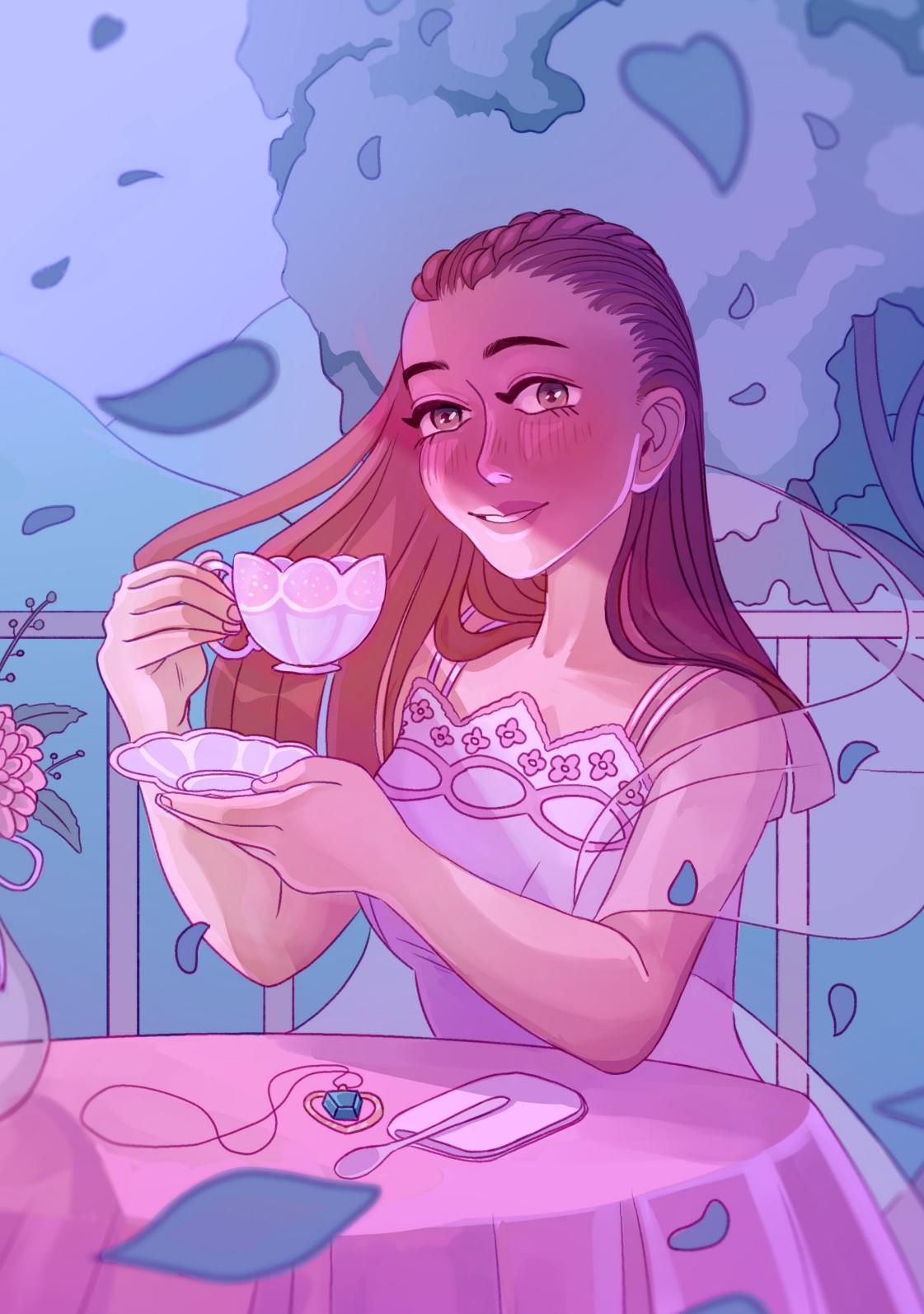
Dahlia holds her breath as he lifts the cup to his lips and takes a sip.

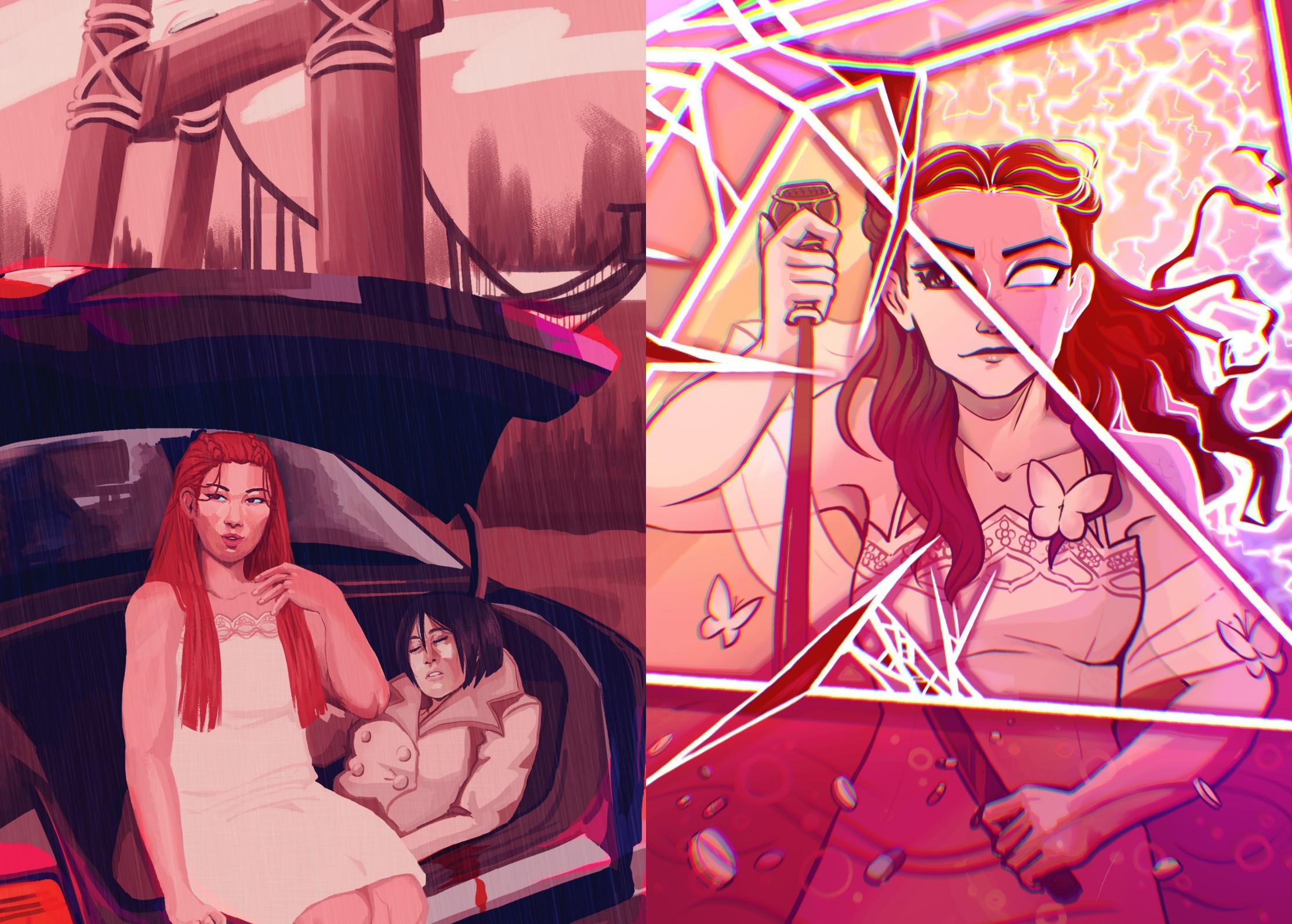
With the amount of poison she had been able to use, it will be a few hours before it fully infiltrates his system. Enough to give her an alibi.

And just like that, another job gone off without a hitch.

When Diego offers her that crooked smirk and guides her back to their seats, see, no harm done, sweetheart, the smile that Dahlia gives him in return is the most honest part of their entire conversation.

Well, she thinks, some harm done.





FEEL BETTER

by: PD

"I think she hates me."

It was simple and matter-of-fact, not the way you'd expect someone to talk about a person you'd give your life for.

They're seven years old and sitting on the old bench outside the temple. It's creaky and cracking, but they love the way it was secluded and secret. Their own private escape; quiet and peaceful.

They seemed to never be able to escape the chaos. The thundering of the snowstorms around them, the roaring waterfall, the loud chants coming from the trainees in the temple.

The bruises and the crying.

Somehow the chaos was more comfortable.

"You wanna go swimming?" Dahlia asks, breaking the unfamiliar quietness.

"It's going to be cold." Iris shrugs, swinging her legs back and forth as if she was actually able to go anywhere.

"I like the cold."

"You would."

"I mean, why wouldn't she? All I ever did was make her feel bad."

"Why does dad like you better?"

The words were quick, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment of vulnerability.

Iris looks up from her diary, "What?"

"Why does dad like you better? He doesn't hit you as much. He doesn't threaten to send you away. He doesn't believe you when you say it's your fault. I'm always wrong, somehow."

Iris bites her lip and looks around as if something is going to come around the corner and change the conversation. An uncomfortable exchange of glances.

"You can't say I'm wrong," Dahlia says again, ending the silence.

"I don't think he likes me better - I just don't cause as many problems as you."

Dahlia blinks then blinks again. Feeling her ears get hot and her breath get heavy. She closes her eyes and lays back in the snow.

"Kiss ass."

The room is cold and gray, with windows that look into the building next door and a noise machine breaking the silence. It feels more like a prison than a therapist's office.

The potted plants lay on the table next to her, dying and shriveled up. She wonders if they'd ever been watered.

"I mean, even before I sent her away. It always seemed like I liked her more than she liked me."

Dahlia never understood why they had to go to school when they didn't have powers, but something about the lessons seemed like a work of fiction. A fascinating fairy tale full of demons, ghosts, and life after death.

Iris always wondered if the spirits were scared when they came back to the realm of the living.

Dahlia always wondered what spirit medium would be stupid enough to channel a demon.

"We should go to the channeling today," Iris said, looking up from her doodles on the page in front of her.

"Why? It's not like they'll let us in. We don't have powers."

"Not if we don't sneak in now, they won't."

She loved their secret trips to the temple. Watching as the spirit mediums chanted in a language she didn't understand, the candles flickering in the dark halls, and the spirit becoming a part of this world. It was like a movie. And Dahlia wished she could be the protagonist.

But she didn't have powers, so she never would.

And Iris would pretend she didn't either, until the day she died. Because if Dahlia was missing a piece of something special, so would Iris.

That's what soulmates do, after all.

"I just wonder how I've managed to sabotage every single one of my relationships."

"You have trauma. I don't think it's unreasonable to say you have anxious attachment because of it."

"I don't have trauma."

They pack up their butterfly backpacks on their ninth birthday and run. Away from the chaos. Away from the bruises. Away from the apology necklaces. Away from their mother locking herself in her room, plotting revenge.

They run for miles and miles, but can't escape Mount Mitama in the background watching over them and reminding them there is no escape.

There is no freedom.

When they're brought back home with the police; Iris tells them Dahlia was lying. Their parents would never. She's just mad they forgot their birthday and wanted to take a trip.

Dahlia gets the birthday gift of new bruises that trace her arms, covering the old ones that haven't quite healed yet and her mother's hands around her throat.

"I sent her away. I called her a nuisance."

"You protected her from your abusive parents. I don't think she hates you for that."

Dahlia picks at the dying leaves next to her.

"She told me she does."

There's rain the day Iris gets sent away. There's always rain.

A thundering, screaming, thrashing plea to be let out. To go home. A pounding on the window that matches the pouring rain.

"You know as well as I do she's a nuisance. We'd be better without her." Dahlia lies to her father, trying to hold back the tears.

Iris's cries are heard through the closed car door and thunderclaps shaking the ground beneath her. A pleading to stay with Dahlia, to go home. I'll be good, I promise. Just let me stay

with Dahlia.

Dahlia waves goodbye with a hollow face. She feels like a ghost leaving a piece of her heart behind.

"I hate you! I hate you, I hate you!" echoing through the gray sky as the car pulls away - winding up the largest mountain she's ever seen.

She sits on the porch, she doesn't come in to meet her new mom or sister. She just sits in the pouring rain until she can't tell what's the tears and what's the rain anymore. Letting the soaked strands of hair cling to her pale face until she falls asleep.

"Are you mad she didn't help that day on the Eagle River?"

"I don't think you're allowed to probe like that."

"I'm not looking for a specific answer, I'm just trying to understand."

"More annoyed than mad. She somehow always does the right thing."

She's fourteen and standing on a bridge. Feeling as it blows in the storm around her and praying to whatever gods are out there it doesn't break. That Iris changes her mind and shows up. That she isn't alone - again. Like always.

And that Iris, by some miracle, comes.

And she doesn't.

She's fourteen years old and seconds away from being dead. From being shot. From being hostage with a man who took her innocence and plays the part of hopeless romantic. What a stupid brute of a man. Ruining her life - again.

She knows it's now or never. It's literally life or death, and she chooses death - her own way. She

bites his arm and jumps into the roaring river. Floating in the freezing water in the pouring rain, waiting for it to take her and carry her away from the pain. Die and never return.

Because who is she if not abused, and hurt. Who is she if Iris isn't there with her?

Because Iris wasn't there with her. Because she was alone.

Because her death is probably what Iris wanted, anyway.

"I think we need to set up a safety plan."

"I'm not suicidal."

"Not right now, sure. But you have a history of attempts."

"It's not like I can put Iris as an emergency contact."

She sits under the shady oak tree near the art building, watching the clouds roll by in the clear, blue sky. Something about it feels suffocating and foreign - so peaceful and quiet.

She misses the rain and the chaos.

She pulls out her phone and dials the number she's had memorized for years.

"I need you to do me a favor."

She outlines the plan. Pretend to be her and get the necklace back. Hide her crime. Help her live a happy life. Marry a pretty girl and become an author. Travel the world and take pictures of flowers. Leave the abuse and the lies and the deception behind her. Get away with murder.

Finally, be happy.

But of course, Iris had other plans. She always did.

years; it comes naturally like she's done it a thousand times.

"Dahlia?"

The voice on the other line is quiet and confused. Like she's hearing from a ghost.

She practically is. It's been almost a century at this point.

"Hey, Iris. It's me. I'm sorry."

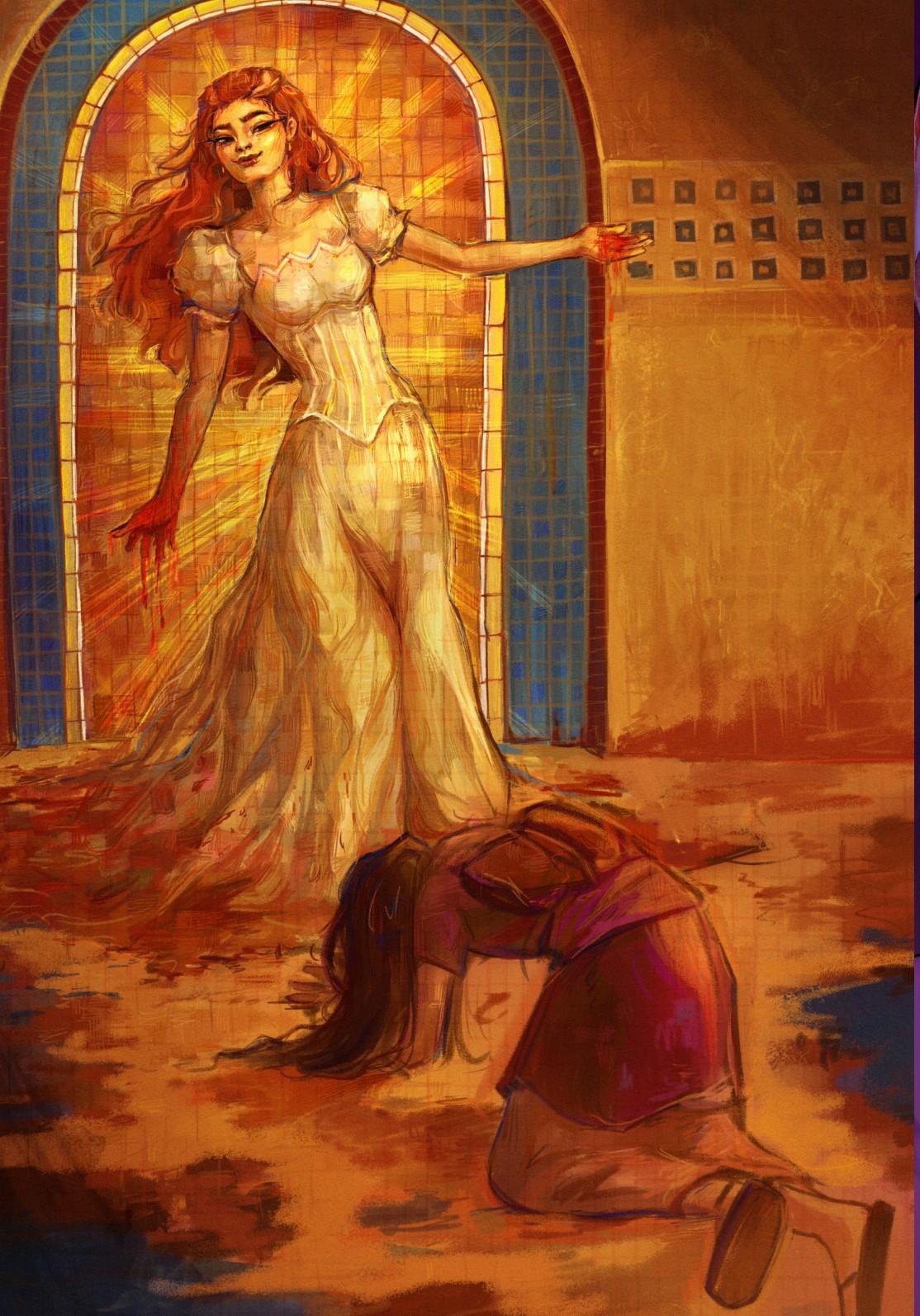
It's silent for a while. Nothing but the pitter-patter of prison boots on the cold concrete floor.

"For what?"

"Everything."

They sit in silence a little longer, and Dahlia swears she hears sniffling from the other end.

She finally breaks the silence and wipes a tear from her cheek.



VIGIL

by: Rhilicious

"Aren't you scared?"

"Why would I be? You're the last person who should be asking that."

Iris brought her hand up to her lips, deep in thought. Dahlia stared back, unrelenting.

"It's okay if you want to talk about it, sis. I'll listen to you, I promise!" Iris's forced bout of cherriness brought a sour expression to her sister's face. Iris immediately gave up her fourth attempt at improving the mood of the conversation.

"And have you tattle about the *final* moments of your *tragic* twin to all your little friends? Not a chance." Dahlia scowled at the timid girl who sat at the other side of the glass. "Not a chance," she repeated.

Iris bowed her head low, staring at her hands in her lap. She repeated a mantra in her head: *she's only like this because she's been suffering for too long*. She refused to blame her sister for anything. She kept silent, collecting her thoughts as she wondered about different topics they could converse about instead.

Dahlia, however, found her mind leaving the confines of the visitor's room. She floated away from the local prison, allowing herself to enjoy the ride to a far more entertaining place her consciousness could take her.

She found herself in her former college dorm and in the flower fields she would frequent when she wrote poetry. She breathed in the

fresh air of the sea she visited when summer crept up after spring, and she greeted the armies of people that would do her bidding without question whenever she entered a lecture hall. Truly, the best parts of her life were when she was free to do whatever she wanted in the day, enjoying the finest pleasures of life; and at night, when left to her own devices, she would plot different instances of revenge on her fluffy bed, falling asleep to thoughts of achieving her greatest ambitions.

But then her mind brought her back to her dinky, suffocating prison cell, and Dahlia swore she had forgotten the feeling of peace.

She could have made the dreary room her own—perhaps make it comfortable until the day she would stop needing it. Alas, her horrible excuse of a birth giver showed up without an invitation, and led her back into a world of schemes that brought her to her demise.

You will assist me in the murder of Maya Fey, the hag insisted. Morgan had lost her at the first two words, but Dahlia's attention perked up at the proposed murder of someone Mia Fey held dear. It was a simple plan in its purest form: murder Maya Fey as Pearl Fey. It was truly pitiful to be a slave to the Fey clan even after death, but soaking in the blood of Mia Fey's sister was a delicious idea too delectable to turn her nose up at.

The pitiful sobs on the other side of the glass brought Dahlia back from her thoughts. Her twin sister had drowned out the idle sounds of the guards standing guard outside of the

room, and even the sound of fluorescent lights flickering and humming.

If all Iris wanted to do on her final visit was to cry, she should have had the decency to save it for tomorrow. Dahlia's final day was being wasted on listening to unending sobbing, truly a waste of her final hours.

But would it be any different if she had chosen to walk around the prison's courtyard and to admire the flowers? If she had chosen to keep to herself until she had to be escorted to whatever dreadful room had been waiting for her? None of it would change the fact that she would be dead before dusk arrived the next day.

"Save the crying for when I'm dead, stupid." The last word fell from her lips naturally, but just for today, Dahlia wondered if she should have omitted it.

"You're my sister, Dahlia," Iris whispered between distressing sobs, "No matter what has happened between us, you're my sister and I don't know what I'll do without you."

On second thought, Iris was the dumbest person on Earth.

Stupid, Dahlia thought, never offer kindness to someone who repeatedly attempts to ruin your life.

"If I was just as strong as you... if only the circumstances were better, I, I..." The flood of tears on Iris's face resumed once more, and Dahlia sighed at another round of needless crying.

If you want to be strong, then be strong. Dahlia's strength didn't come from the accumulation of tears and wishes on stars, it came from the fierce and passionate desire to grasp for what she believed to be rightfully hers. It came from hatred, from anger—from spite and jealousy. It had even evolved into greed.

There is no greater meaning to the world, she believed. Humans were placed in the world to be born, live, then die. Dahlia resigned herself to giving her days meaning by fighting for

what she wanted until the bitter end. She had finally reached the end of her line, albeit a little early due to her foiled plans, but she refused to crumble. She would stay true to the life she lived until her final breath, and thus, she could protect what was left of her pride.

If she had to be honest, however, she was a little worried. Death by hanging seemed far less pleasant than a lethal injection. She never got to say goodbye to the flower fields she loved, nor was she able to properly lounge in the warm sands on her favorite beach. She had never gotten around to graduating and earning her Literature degree, nor was she able to thoroughly study the intricacies of her favorite authors. Sylvia Plath would have to wait for her in her next life, unfortunately.

She wondered how Death would come for her. Would it stop for her like how Emily Dickinson described it to be—visiting old places and reminiscing good times in his little carriage before he led her to the end?

It was an overwhelming realization of her own humanity.

She admitted that she had allowed herself to lounge in the clouds—even higher, sometimes. Her hubris was her downfall; she was Icarus drowning in the sea after briefly tasting freedom. Her dearest sister who had spent more time in isolation was free to roam the world, while she, the child who had fought for everything she had, was locked up in a little cell waiting for judgement day.

Maybe being a beautiful fool would have been better—to submit and to feign weakness forevermore in exchange for a pleasant life little girls everywhere had dreamed of. Dahlia was just too stubborn to be a little girl in a great big world. It was her oyster, just like how her old teachers told her, she was smart enough to take whatever she wanted, so she did.

She took, and she took. She took what would help her survive, she took what would be useful later. She took what would make her life easier, and she took what luxuries she spotted with eyes sharp as knives.

Her greed swallowed her whole, spat her out, and now she was left to pick up the pieces of what was left after its feast.

After barely paying attention to all the whispers and stutters from the other side of the glass, Dahlia met Iris's eyes to find her still crying.

Dahlia glared at Iris, telling her to get a grip before she asked the guards to escort her back inside. Iris pleaded for Dahlia to stay, gathering up her words to make her sister's final conversation worth her time.

Dahlia, impatient as she was, spoke up first: "Oh, boo hoo, you'll cry now and when this is all over, you'll go back to your temple and flowers and life will go back to normal for you."

"That's not true, Lia!" Panic laced in her voice, Iris's statements were awkward and disorganized. "I'll... I'll be really sad when you go..."

Dahlia didn't care. She wouldn't feel the same.

"I just—I still can't believe that this is the last time I'll ever get to see you." Iris's roundabout statements were getting tiring. No matter what she did, she always ended up in the same place, content with her waste of energy.

Iris was static, unlike her sister. She will live an awful and boring life on her desolate mountain, die without discovering life's greatest pleasures, and yet she'll state that her life was full of meaning. Dahlia found that ignorant.

"Oh, you'll see me someday, dearest sister. Soon, even. Maybe look in a mirror if you miss me too much." The smile on Dahlia's face was a rare one. Conniving, sweet, call it whatever, it was her favorite weapon.

Iris returned that smile with one of her own, and it reminded Dahlia that at least a copy of her pretty face would live on in that world.

"Right... I'll see you when I do, Lia. I'll miss you."

"The same can't be said on my side, but sure."

"You never change, do you?" Iris's voice was full of fondness. Of acceptance. Out of all the people she had met in her short life, Iris was probably the only person Dahlia could be herself around. There was no pretending, unless she was manipulating her, and in times like these, it was a pathetic substitute—a substitute nonetheless, for what was supposed to feel comforting.

Dahlia never did find someone who accepted her true nature and loved her for it. Iris's love was true, probably, but it was ignorant. Everyone else loved Dahlia for what she pretended to be, but for a while, it was okay. Until it wasn't. Then it was okay again. Dahlia didn't need anyone else in a world that constantly disappointed her.

Iris left the visitor's room without much fuss, choosing to leave by turning her back on the outside world, glancing at the pitiful criminal behind the glass until the door closed shut. Dahlia stated in her seat, thinking.

That coward is going to have her eyes closed tomorrow.

And maybe that was for the best.

Dahlia stared at her reflection in the glass, no longer being obscured by a figure on the other side. She refused to let prison dampen her aura. She'll go down as the prettiest and most dangerous inmate, and that was to be her final hurrah until plans from beyond the grave bring her back. Ambitious and cunning, beautiful and treacherous, that was Dahlia Hawthorne, and that will continue to be Dahlia Hawthorne until her last breath.

It truly was all meaningless in the end. When the sun is at its peak, she will cease to exist, and that will be the end of her story. Her second coming will depend on the abilities of incompetent clusters of monkeys, and she didn't want to place too much hope on anything or anyone ever again.

Perhaps this execution was a gift; a one-way ticket to get away from a meaningless world that had its blatant favorites. Favorites like Phoenix Wright, consumer of glass; Diego Armando, survivor of potent poison. Never Dahlia Hawthorne, the girl who worked for what she deserved, yet never received what was due until it all spiralled out of control.

Unfair, that was the best word to describe it.

Unfair, the word that echoed in Dahlia's mind as she was escorted back to her cell, her lifespan dictated by the ticks of a clock and the coughs of an old man on a legal bench.





TWO GHOSTS

by: Krissey

Dahlia opens her eyes, which is Feenie's first mistake.

One look at him and she frowns. She hasn't done anything, but already, he's frowning back. In an instant's glance, she can see that this Phoenix Wright is older and rougher around the edges than the last one she saw. For a moment, he's a stranger. The blue-suited dumbass she remembers screaming at must have taken a bad turn somewhere to wind up before her in that formless grey hoodie. Maybe he got hit by the wrong end of a car.

Actually, that's funny to think about.

Her wrists aren't bound. The clothes on her person are disgustingly familiar. Dahlia smells the candles and incense before she recognizes the dim light of Channeling Chamber for what it is.

That settles her resolve.

"Dahlia—"

In an instant, she's off her knees and off the mat. Her bare feet pound against the floor as she darts for the altar behind her.

It takes two seconds to reach it.

It takes another two seconds to grab the mirror from its stand. Somehow, incredibly enough, everything on the altar is exactly as she remembers from her childhood. It seems no matter how many years have passed, some things in Kurain remain stubbornly the same.

"Dahlia, wait!"

Her fingers latch onto the mirror. One step back, and she raises the flat surface above her head, ready to thrust it down to the floor with all her might. With luck, the shards should be enough. If she finds the right vein, she can do it. She knows she can. And wouldn't that be a lovely thing for Feenie to have? An opportunity to hold his friend in his arms as she bleeds to death—

He grabs her wrist.

"Dahlia, listen to me! It's not what you think! Do you think I'd take the chance to have you channeled in *Maya Fey's* body?"

That makes her pause. Her head snaps up. Phoenix is at her shoulder, holding her wrist with an iron grip that's frustratingly hard to wriggle out from.

Fuck it.

She stomps on one of his socked feet.

Immediately, Phoenix bends over, gasping and hobbling away, reaching for his toes—"Ow, ow, ow, ow..."—while Dahlia peels out of his grip. She spins around.

In hindsight, the fact that her hair didn't fan out with her should have been her first clue.

The mirror has never been perfect. In the days before she decided her twin daughters weren't worth the fight to keep, Morgan used to tell her it served a more symbolic purpose than

functional. The cloudy surface makes it difficult to see her reflection, but Dahlia squints and frowns and can't deny that the hair on top of her head isn't black. There is no dorky topknot at its crown.

It's brown. Shaped like a pretzel.

Dahlia can't feel her fingertips. *And I had almost—*

No, she tells herself. Feenie did this on purpose. Exactly for this reason: so that you wouldn't.

Her grip tightens on the faulty mirror. She lets her hands fall to her sides, knuckles white around the rim of its plate backing, and she growls, "Damn you, Phoenix Wright."

The silence that settles between them is thick and heavy. For the second time that night, they are on their knees across from each other. Or is it morning? Dahlia isn't sure. The Channeling Chamber has no windows and no other door save for the thick one locked behind Phoenix. The only light sources in the room are the multitude of weak, scentless candles lining the walls. It's hard to tell when she's been summoned. Not to mention why.

"I could just leave, you know," she says once their staring match has grown boring. "Sorry that you apparently missed me, Feenie, but the feeling isn't mutual—"

"I didn't have Pearl channel you because I missed you." It's the first time that Dahlia pays attention to that voice. It's not just his appearance that's aged poorly; something in the way he speaks has grown, too. Matured. He doesn't rise to her bait as easily as she remembers. "I needed to ask you a question."

"Is that all?" Dahlia raises an eyebrow. "Fine. The answer's no. Can I go now?"

"What was the name of the poison you used against Mr. Armando thirteen years ago?"

Dahlia freezes.

She snaps her gaze up to meet Phoenix's hard brown eyes, set deep into his face above a frown, and suddenly, she realizes she doesn't know how to read him. For the first time in her life, she can't get an idea of what he's thinking. She can't tell if he's pulling her leg or if he really does mean it's been *thirteen years* since she poisoned that insignificant, nosy defense attorney when it should have been six.

Thirteen years.

That would make him... what, thirty-three?

As soon as she finds her voice, Dahlia clears her throat. "That's a stupid question, Feenie. I already told you. I told everyone in that courtroom. Don't you remember? It was the kind of poison that was—"

"—incredibly lethal with an extremely small dose. The size of your fingernail. I know; I know."

Ugh. Thirty-three and still as annoying as ever, apparently. "If you've read the court record so carefully, then I'm not sure why you've gone to all this trouble just to ask me."

"I need the name. The *name* of the poison that you used. What was it?"

"Why?" As soon as the question leaves her mouth, Dahlia's eyebrows lift. She tilts her head back and laughs. "Oh! Oh, wait. Hang on. This is good. Are you telling me that the great Phoenix Wright is so desperate to know what it was in that necklace after all these years, he willingly channeled his *dead ex-girlfriend* to find out?"

You weren't my girlfriend.

"My memory of the million different ways you said my name begs to differ."

Phoenix's face tightens.

Dahlia's grin widens.

After a long stretch of silence, Phoenix shakes his head. He looks away and down to the mat under his knees. "I don't have time for this. I'm trying to speed up the process of this investigation for the simulation trial. I can't get caught up in this stupid thing you do where you smile at me with her face."

And there it is: his earnestness. Never too far deep under the surface, no matter how many layers he tries to hide it with. No matter how old he gets when she's not looking.

Dahlia's enjoying herself now. Thirteen years may have been hard to swallow—she's not thinking about that; she's not—but she didn't know being channeled could be this fun. "What's this about a simulation trial?"

Interesting how sharply Phoenix's face pales. "Shit. Ignore that. I shouldn't have said that." He ducks his head to the side with a casual briskness that she hasn't associated with *Feenie* before. "I've looked everywhere for the name of that poison you used, and for some reason, I can't find anything in either State vs. Wright or State vs. Fawles."

"Poor Feenie."

"I'd ask Ivy University for the chemical make-up or a record to at least be able to identify it, but the murder happened at nine, so there's no one awake to look at it right now—"

"Wow." Dahlia lets the word hang off her lips. Her tone lifts and turns falsetto, full of woe. Scratching at the chin of an overgrown puppy. "Burning the midnight oil, are we? Working yourself down to the bone? What time is it right now? Three in the morning? Four? Have you been up all night, unable to get a wink of sleep?"

"Stop talking like that."

Dahlia smiles. "When's the simulation trial I'm not supposed to know about? Tomorrow?"

"No, it's the day after—" Phoenix cuts himself off, glancing at his flip phone. At least that

atrocious brick of plastic is hilariously familiar. He sighs. "Yeah. Tomorrow."

Dahlia hums, leaning back. She pretends to think. "So let me get this straight: some poor, unfortunate soul's been murdered, and for some reason, you've convinced yourself the poison from this murder and the poison that I used on Mr. Armando are one and the same."

"It sounds stupid when you put it like that."

"It is stupid."

"You can't blame me. There are a lot of similarities between the two cases." And as he talks, Phoenix's voice gets quicker. His brain is moving faster than his mouth can in order to get the words out and frankly, Dahlia's just waiting for him to bite his tongue at this point. He *has* to. Any second now. "Too many to just be a coincidence."

"How similar is it?"

"For one, it's extremely likely he was poisoned through his coffee that he drank shortly before his death, just like what happened with your attempt on Mr. Armando's life at the courthouse—"

"Oh, wait. Hold on. You know what?" Dahlia puts a finger to her chin and tilts her head. "Changed my mind, sorry. Actually, I don't care."

Phoenix glowers.

And it's rude, really, how the dead don't get the chance to be ghosts unless they're borrowing someone else's body. But here, now, borrowing her little sister's, Dahlia finally feels like she can haunt someone.

At least there's one good thing to come out of being dead.

Of course her fun should come to an end just as it's getting good. In the silence left by Phoenix's lack of an answer, his brick of plastic buzzes in

his hand. Phoenix jerks to his feet. He pulls his phone to his ear and spins his back to face her. A poor choice, but he's standing in front of the locked door and she doesn't have a weapon. So she decides to watch him pace. She listens to the harried way he breathes too heavily into the receiver.

Then, with a nod and a, "Got it. Thanks, Ema," Phoenix shoves his phone in his hoodie pocket. He pauses, fiddles with something she can't see, and then sticks his other hand in the opposite pocket so they're both hidden.

He turns around.

There's something different on his face. Something that wasn't there before. Something she immediately doesn't like. When Dahlia drags her eyes up from his pockets to his face, she knows exactly what it means. She loathes it.

"Atroquinine," he says. "Ring a bell?"

Dahlia raises an eyebrow.

"Answer the question."

Really? He gets the rest of his life to live after they're done with their little chat in this chamber; she only gets these few minutes, and *he* thinks *he* has the right to be demanding? The least he could do is grovel for his information. She hates this new *tough and mighty* act.

Dahlia rolls her eyes, curling her lip. "What's the point in asking now? Sounds like you've already received your answer from whoever 'Ema' is."

Phoenix doesn't move. He stands close to the door, hands still in the pockets of his hoodie. She hates him for it. "Call it closure," he says.

Fine.

"It wasn't atroquinine. I've never heard of that before in my life." She pauses, eyes flicking up to catch the way his hands fiddle in his pockets. The jade of a magatama always makes a strange sound when flipped over. "No psychelocks."

You're welcome."

"Then what was the name of *your* poison?"

The scoff that rises out of Dahlia's throat is more of a snarl than a laugh. "What name?" Her voice echoes throughout the Channeling Chamber. "You're still on about that? I thought the whole point of your bravado was that you didn't come here to see me because you missed me."

"I didn't."

"And yet you're making such a big deal about such an insignificant little detail."

"You're making such a big deal about keeping it secret."

"Yeah, well, I'm *dead*, Phoenix," Dahlia snaps.

Maybe I want to.

And that's the pinnacle on which everything Dahlia both starts and ends now, isn't it? Being dead is why she can close her eyes and thirteen years can breeze by and Phoenix fucking Wright can be thirty-three while she's still twenty-five—always twenty-five; what an ugly age to be stuck at—and the world will spiral on without her. When they're done, Pearl will blink her eyes open and she'll look at Phoenix and say something stupid like, *Did it go okay?*

No more time for Dahlia. No more space in the world and its planless machinations for her. No matter. No nothing. There should be more she should say, more she should want to say. But she has nothing.

In every sense of the word.

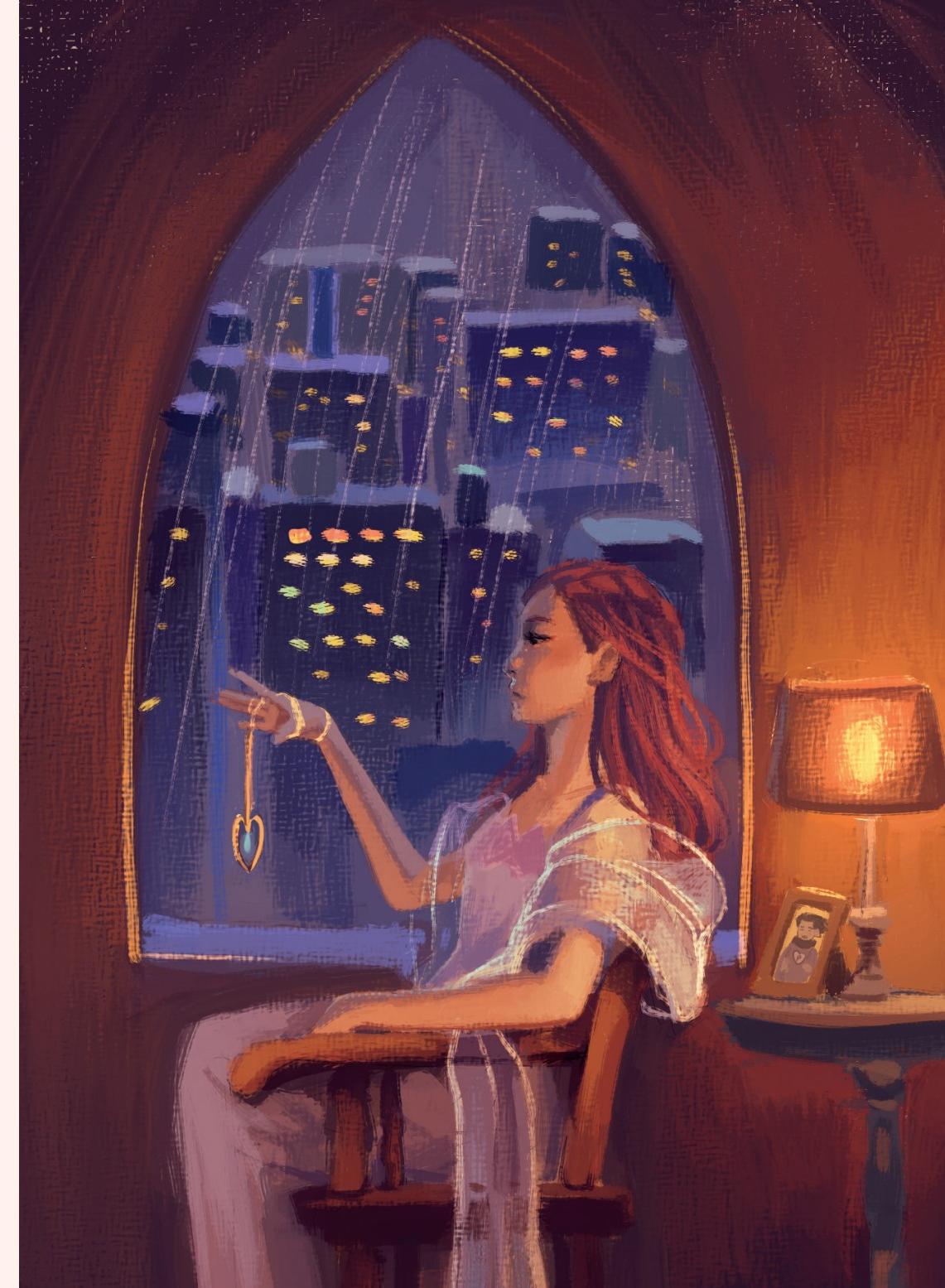
Except this.

Suddenly, there is value to biting her own tongue if only to feel that even while dead, even when she doesn't have her own body or her own clothes or her own time or her own life, she *has* something. Something that Phoenix Wright doesn't.

When she looks at Phoenix, he's fiddling in his pocket again. Then, he pulls his hands free. Dahlia raises an eyebrow. She hates the way he stares at her with a disgusting sort of understanding that wasn't there a few minutes ago. She rolls her eyes and twists her head away. "Whatever. Next time, let that cousin of mine channel me instead."

"There won't be a next time," he says.

Dahlia laughs behind a wide smile that's more shark than lady. "Keep telling yourself that, Feenie," she says and closes her eyes.







Traces of Beauty

BUGCHELL

Artists



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dahliasheep



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